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THE FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES OF LAMARTINE

The object of this article is to gather together scattered data in regard to the financial record of Lamartine, and to use these facts as a basis for a brief discussion of the causes which led up to the unfortunate financial condition of the poet in his old age. The following unpublished letter, in the handwriting of Mlle Valentine de Cessia de Lamartine, the niece of the poet, may serve as a starting-point for this discussion. This letter was written when Lamartine was seventy-four years of age, and is typical of the other letters of this period.

PARIS, 5 décembre, 1864

M. de Lamartine, dépouillé cette année par la partialité de l'Angleterre, de la fortune de sa femme, qui devait l'aider à désintéresser ses créanciers, est obligé plus que jamais de recourir aux deux honorables ressources qui ne lui ont jamais manqué: son travail et votre amitié.

Il vous prie en conséquence de lui renvoyer le plus promptement possible, le mandat d'abonnement ci joint signé de vous.

ALPH. DE LAMARTINE

43, RUE DE LA VILLE L'ÉVÊQUE¹

The finances of Lamartine were in a deplorable condition at the time the above letter was written; a condition which was not the result of a few years of misfortune but was the culmination of years of ill-regulated expenditure. It is necessary, in order to have a clear understanding of the situation in which we find Lamartine at this advanced age, to study the entire history of his finances, a study which can be best made through his correspondence. The most of the important letters from 1807 to 1852 are of easy access in the collection published by his niece, Mlle Valentine de Cessia, under the title, *Correspondance de Lamartine*;² but those letters which deal

¹ The above letter was attached to the back of the title-page of an edition of the *Œuvres complètes* of Lamartine, purchased by the University of Illinois Library in 1915. The first volume of this edition contains the autograph of the author—*Mémoire et reconnaissance, Lamartine*—written on the fly-leaf. No evidence of the previous publication of this letter has been found in the individual letters or in the various collections of letters that have been consulted.

² *Correspondance de Lamartine*, publiée par Mme Valentine de Lamartine, 4 vols., Paris, 1881-82 (second edition).

with the last seventeen years of the poet's life are less easily available, as they are scattered in different collections.

Three words from the foregoing letter—*désintéresser ses créanciers*—might well serve as a key to the financial record of his life, since at no time does Lamartine seem to be completely free from debt. As a youth, he received frequent aid from the private purse of his mother, and as a young man of twenty-nine we find him complaining in a letter to a youthful friend, Mlle Eléonore de Canonge, of his harassing debts, a complaint which he terminates with the prophetic statement so applicable to his later life: "Quand on a mis, en commençant sa route, le pied dans cette maudite boue, on ne s'en retire jamais totalement."¹ He was relieved of the debts in question through the indulgence of an uncle and two aunts—*à l'insu même de mon père*, he adds.

The gifts made him by his father, and his uncles and aunts, at the time of his marriage in 1820, together with the available portion of the dowry of his bride,² furnished him with a comfortable income, which, however, was insufficient to meet his expenditures, especially during his diplomatic career in Italy. The famous Oriental trip in 1832-33, which lasted sixteen months, was the cause of an additional burden on his budget. The expensive nature of this undertaking may be judged from the fact that he chartered for this voyage an entire boat at a rate of approximately three thousand francs a month. It must be confessed that this expense weighed but lightly upon him, for in writing to his friend the comte de Virieu, he ends the description of this transaction with the nonchalant statement: "C'est prodigieusement peu pour un beau navire."³ Three months later it is a caravan of sixty to one hundred men, with the necessary complement of horses, mules, etc., which he acquires for his service, again with the modest statement: "Cet immense attirail de choses . . . n'est pas énormément cher."⁴ The other expenses of the trip are in proportion. It is only just to state, on the other hand, that

¹ Letter of October 8, 1819, *Correspondance*, II, 77.

² See article of M. René Doumic (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, September-October, 1905, p. 171).

³ Letter of June 25, 1832, *Correspondance*, III, 281.

⁴ Letter of September 6, 1832, *Correspondance*, III, 292.

the cost of this trip was made up, three years later, by the publication and sale of the *Voyage en Orient*.

The strain imposed upon his finances by this voyage was increased by a succession of financial misfortunes which caused him to write, three years later: "J'ai perdu tous mes capitaux disponibles dans des banqueroutes, des entreprises mal exécutées, en Amérique, et dans une grêle qui vient de ravager *entièrement* mes propriétés où j'avais mis des avances énormes; je dois beaucoup et je ne puis vendre."¹ The same state of affairs exists in 1841, for we find him seeking, in that year, a loan of 200,000 francs on two of his estates valued at 1,400,000 francs, and which are already mortgaged for 465,000 francs.²

The reasons for this indebtedness, as well as that of later years, are not difficult to discover. In the first place, Lamartine, with the exception of his last few years, always lived the life of a rich nobleman, surrounding himself with beautiful things: horses, dogs, books, works of art. "Les chevaux ! autre bénédiction de la vie, qui me soulage un peu. J'en ai de charmants et en bon nombre," he writes to a friend in 1837, in the same letter in which he acknowledges: "J'ai cinq ou six ans très-étroits à traverser, plus d'argent et des charges viagères énormes!"³ The expenses of this luxurious life could have been met by the income from his books, if he had been willing to devote himself to literature alone. Unfortunately, the desire for a more active life carried him into other fields, in which he was less successful. In business affairs he was possessed with an innate fondness for taking chances, although he writes emphatically a propos of his real estate transactions in Asia: "Je ne fais pas de spéculations, je les ai en horreur."⁴ One form of speculation in which he indulged was that of purchasing the growing crops of neighboring vine-growers, in order to use them as security for loans, transactions in which he lost large sums by the depreciation in price of the crops or their destruction by storms or plant diseases. A good description of one of these dealings is given in his *Mémoires politiques*,

¹ *Correspondance*, III, 367.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 104.

³ Letter of September 29, 1837, *Correspondance*, III, 433.

⁴ Letter of April 14, 1850, *Correspondance*, IV, 312.

when in 1849 the vine-growers of his neighborhood offered him their crops on credit to help him meet his debts. He says: "J'acceptai avec attendrissement. Je fixai moi-même le prix de ces vins largement aussi; je les revendis à perte aux marchands qui prenaient mes propres récoltes, et je vécus ainsi sur un fonds de roulement emprunté et commode, dont je me rendais un compte approximatif et inexact."¹

Other financial burdens which Lamartine imposed upon himself originated from a desire to keep the ancestral estates together, and to become a great land-owner. With these objects in view, he purchased the shares of his sisters in the family lands, and spent large sums of money for their improvement, and in the purchase of nearby land, only to find that the revenues from the properties were insufficient to meet the costs.

Year after year the struggle continues. A sale of personal property—horses, books, pictures—and unencumbered lands, in 1844, together with 250,000 francs obtained the following year from the sale of the copyright for twelve years of *Les Girondins*,² gave him hope of complete liquidation within three years. This hope was deceived, for in 1849, when he retired from active political life, after passing rapidly from the greatest public favor to the greatest degree of unpopularity, he found himself hopelessly involved.³ His popularity during the troublous times of the revolution of 1848, in which he played so important a rôle, was costly; M. Edouard Grenier in his *Souvenirs littéraires* informs us that Mme de Lamartine admitted to him one day that their charities for a few months alone in this year had exceeded 100,000 francs.⁴

Lamartine's acts of charity were many, for one of the most attractive qualities of the poet was his kindness of heart and open-handed generosity. Frequent accounts occur of the ready help which he extended to colleagues and friends, even in his later years of misfortune.⁵ On the other hand, some of his gifts may be regarded as a

¹ *Œuvres complètes* de Lamartine (Paris, 1860-63), XL, 64.

² *Correspondance*, IV, 208.

³ See article by M. Léon Séché in the *Revue des Français*, April, 1911, p. 273.

⁴ *Souvenirs littéraires*, par Edouard Grenier (Paris, 1894), p. 27.

⁵ See article entitled "Lamartine et l'école romantique," by M. Léon Séché (*Annales Romantiques*, II, 312).

mixture of charity and politics, such as the donations of his earlier years described by him in a letter to his intimate friend, the comte de Virieu, in which he announces his defeat in an election at Mâcon:—"Or je ne crois pas qu'il y ait une condition plus populaire que la mienne à Mâcon . . . j'ai fait pour 40,000 francs de routes à mes frais, j'ai donné 2,000 francs au choléra; j'ai donné cette année 25,000 francs de livres à la Bibliothèque de la ville, etc., etc., etc.; j'ai marché à la tête de la garde nationale, etc., etc., etc."¹ The result of all these efforts he announced earlier in the letter: "J'ai été ballotté avec un serrurier tapageur, et le serrurier a été nommé!" In the *Correspondance* for 1848, we find, similarly, a letter to the mayor of Mâcon in which Lamartine promises a subscription of five thousand francs toward the establishment in that city of a *comptoir d'escompte*, and also sends two thousand francs to be distributed for charitable purposes among the workingmen of the city; these gifts are accompanied by the request that the mayor announce the fact in the newspaper of Mâcon.²

At the end of his political career, Lamartine, in order to recoup his losses, turns to his Asiatic estate near Smyrna, which the sultan, Abdul Medjid, had given him. We find him still optimistic in spite of his many failures—fortune is still just a step ahead of him. After visiting this great estate, he writes to one of his friends: "C'est véritablement la *Limagne* d'Asie, il y a la fortune sous quarante ou cinquante formes,"³ and a letter of the following day to another friend is equally enthusiastic:—"Je suis ébloui. Il y a la fortune de cent spéculateurs et de mille agriculteurs."⁴ Unfortunately, men with capital did not share his enthusiasm. He returned empty-handed from a trip to London in search of capital, although he writes with some gratification: "La cité a voulu me recevoir en banquet à Covent-Garden," and adds the somewhat surprising detail: "Les chemins de fer et les paquebots et les hôtels sur la route n'ont pas voulu recevoir un shelling de moi, disant que j'étais l'hôte de l'Angleterre pacifique."⁵

¹ Letter of June 22, 1837, *Correspondance*, III, 427.

² Letter of March, 1848, *Correspondance*, IV, 277.

³ Letter of July 16, 1850, *Correspondance*, IV, 320.

⁴ Letter of July 17, 1850, *Correspondance*, IV, 321.

⁵ *Correspondance*, IV, 334-35.

The *coup d'état* which placed Napoleon III on the throne in 1852 was an additional blow to Lamartine, particularly because a ban was placed on the publication of his popular political paper, *Le Conseiller du peuple*, which had a subscription list of eighty thousand names. It was at this time that he felt obliged to leave his beautiful apartment, 82 rue de l'Université, in order to make his home at the address indicated in the letter printed above, in a gloomy *rez-de-chaussée*, at the rear of the courtyard. Three rooms were retained for house-keeping while the rest of the apartment was turned into a combined bookstore and printing establishment, where our author edited and published, himself, various works, including the forty-volume edition of his *Œuvres complètes*,¹ which bears as evidence on its title-page the words: "Chez l'auteur, rue de la Ville L'Evêque, 43."²

Misfortunes continue steadily during the next decade, and in 1860 the beloved family estate of Milly is sold.³ Lamartine is now seventy years of age, yet in spite of illness he struggles on courageously for several years, but with little hope of relief. The twenty-fourth of November, 1864, just eleven days before the date of our letter, the fact that he appreciates the hopelessness of his condition is indicated by the following words in a letter to his friend, the baron de Chamborant: "L'heure de mon dépouillement absolu approche: à peine ai-je le temps de réfléchir au coup qui nous menace. J'ai eu cependant des créanciers obligeants et de très belles récoltes. Mais la destinée est plus forte que la Providence."⁴ His main hope at this time was in a great number of subscriptions to the edition of his *Œuvres complètes*, in behalf of which the letter at the beginning of this article was written, but the public was no longer interested in the writer, and the edition did not find many subscribers.

¹ The part which Mme de Lamartine took, as proofreader, in the publication of this edition is described in an interesting manner by M. Charles Alexandre in an article in *Le Correspondant*, September 10, 1884.

² This apartment, with its contents, was disposed of by public sale in 1867, two years before the death of its owner, to meet a mortgage held by the Crédit Foncier. Lamartine at that time was lodged in a villa, avenue de l'Empereur (now number 109, avenue Henri-Martin), a lodging granted to him in 1860 by the city of Paris and occupied by him until his death.

³ In his article entitled "Sur un Manuscrit de Lamartine" (*Les Annales Romantiques*, IX [1912], 152), M. Louis Barthou publishes a list of debts drawn up by Lamartine, February 19, 1859, which shows a deficit of over two million francs.

⁴ *Lamartine inconnu*, par A. de Chamborant de Périssat (Paris, 1891), p. 268.

The last letter from which quotations may be made to complete this portion of the financial history was written at Paris, August 1, 1866, not long before the illness which deprived the poet, for the remainder of his life, of the free use of his faculties. This letter furnishes a grand total for the earnings of Lamartine, and at the same time shows the feeling of legitimate pride which the writer took in his brave though unsuccessful struggle:—"J'afficherai quand on voudra, sur tous les murs de Paris, que j'ai *effectivement payé plus de six millions* en quatorze ans d'efforts surhumains, sans avoir reçu un sou du gouvernement, excepté l'autorisation accordée à tout le monde d'une loterie qui n'a pas coûté un sou ni aux contribuables ni à l'Etat."¹

The use of the words "quatorze ans d'efforts surhumains," in the above letter, are amply justified, for poet though he was, none of his misfortunes can be ascribed to a want of capacity for hard work. An examination of his early letters shows that he was a hard worker even before he was forced to be so by financial necessities. His early poems were the result of much thought, and his success later as an orator in the Chambre des Députés was largely due, according to his own confession, to incessant labor. "Je travaille, travaille, travaille comme au collège" he writes in 1838 while a member of this body,² and in a letter of the preceding year he had made the following hazardous admission: "Je fais en secret des vers par milliers depuis six semaines, entre quatre heures du matin et le jour. Si les électeurs le savaient!"³ He was a tremendous worker in his later years. A letter from the year 1852 furnishes evidence that, at the age of sixty-two, he finished a volume of four hundred pages in twenty-four days,⁴ while five years later, when sixty-seven years old, five hundred pages of his *Vie d'Alexandre le Grand* were completed in thirty days.⁵ His literary reputation suffered greatly from this method of work, but the energy and determination of the aged writer in his efforts to meet thus his financial obligations call for admiration.

¹ *Lamartine inconnu*, p. 272.

² *Correspondance*, III, 452.

³ *Ibid.*, III, 441.

⁴ *Lamartine inconnu*, p. 106.

⁵ Letter of Mlle Valentine de Cessia (October 31, 1857), *Lamartine inconnu*, p. 157.

Lamartine was not understood in his day, and during the last years of his life it was the fashion to deride his weaknesses and to belittle his greatness. He was caricatured in the papers and ridiculed in the music-halls; the impecuniosity of the poet was held up to scorn, all possible changes being rung on the bitter jest that in his case the *lyre* had become a *tirelire*, and similar unkind witticisms. In these present days, when the lapse of fifty years since the death of Lamartine makes a proper perspective of his works possible, his literary achievements take a high rank. In a like manner his life, viewed through his letters, contains many praiseworthy features. The few weaknesses which have been touched upon in this article are counterbalanced by admirable traits of character, not the least of which is that sense of personal honor which forced him to such arduous toil in order to meet his financial obligations.

D. H. CARNAHAN

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS